

The orchards seen from a high ridge; that's the old schoolhouse at lower left.

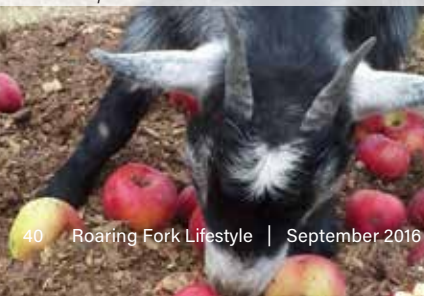
# PICKING HEIRLOOM APPLES AT ORCHARD CREEK RANCH

A FUN FAMILY OUTING ALONG THE COLORADO RIVER

ARTICLE BRIDGET GREY  
PHOTOGRAPHY PROVIDED



Human kids will enjoy the goats, full-sized horses, a miniature horse and numerous metal-sculpture animals at the orchard.



“Our orchard gives children a chance to see where apples really come from—and that’s not just a store shelf,” says Orchard Creek Ranch owner Kirstie Steiner-Groccia. During apple picking season at this 75-year-old orchard, kids can use an apple plucker—Steiner describes it as a “basket on a stick”—while their parents and grandparents take a trip down memory lane.

The orchards that make up Orchard Creek Ranch grow heirloom varieties of Jonathan, Rome and Double Red Delicious apples. Prior to Steiner’s 2007 purchase of the ranch, the orchard had three or four owners. The last one planned to develop the land—something the current owners, John Groccia and Kirstie Steiner-Groccia, vow to avoid. They also made a commitment to maintain the now-manicured five-plus acres so they never again have to clear ditches, bulldoze roads, remove old barbed wire, clear overgrown weeds and hack through a massive pruning job—as Steiner did for the first three years.

No one knows what pioneer transported the trees from the east and planted them here along the Colorado River’s drainage; it’s a mystery to ponder. “When we bought the orchard, I

didn’t even know the trees were planted in rows,” exclaims Steiner-Groccia. “It was that overgrown.” The orchards—there are actually an upper and a lower orchard, each growing different types of apple trees—harbor several mysteries: Who placed the horseshoe on the trunk of the lower-orchard tree that has now grown around it? How long ago was that, and what animal wore the shoe? Was the upper orchard planted to serve the now-defunct, one-room District 32 schoolhouse that borders it?

Kirstie Steiner and her husband, John Groccia, had never owned an orchard before. Steiner, a well-known local artist, did have construction background. John brought extensive commercial and residential landscaping experience to the property.

Now, each spring, the couple and their two expert helpers, Luis Rosales and Uriel Ochoa, strip energy-wasting sucker branches from the 255 trees and prune new branches to let in light and air. Once blossoms open and fruit appears in June, they thin the apple clusters to ensure the crop will have ample room to grow large, mature fruits.



Growing team Luis Rosales, Kirstie Steiner-Groccia and John Groccia.

By September, the tiny apples will have more than quadrupled in size and will be ready for baking into pies, drying for apple leather and pressing into cider—as well as eating!

“In our juice, we use three kinds of apples,” notes Steiner. “Our heirloom Double Red Delicious—they don’t taste anything like the sweet, mushy ones you get in the store—really compliment the tart Jonathan and sweet Rome apples.” During the fall, the orchard’s crew spends three, eight-hour days each week just pressing their cider.

“It’s a lot of work, but we love it,” says Steiner. “It’s very physical, but you get to *see* what you did that day. I also see amazing animals

out here—30 to 40 elk walking through the orchard. In the fall, deer and elk will come eat all the excess apples on the ground. And at the same time, they fertilize the orchard. My work is a labor of love, and I couldn’t ask for a better job.”

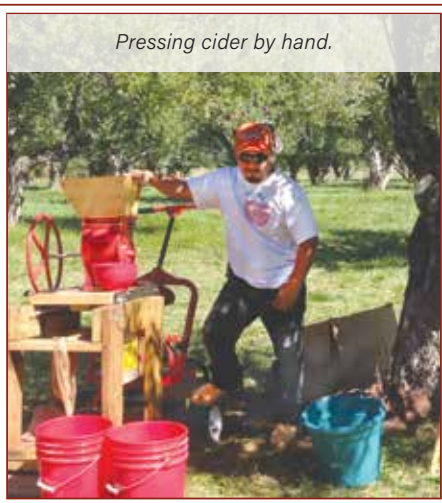
Groccia and Steiner are proud of the fact that no pesticides are used: In 2013, during the rainy season, the growers released 100,000 ladybugs among the trees. Today, many of the red-and-black spotted aphid-eaters are still on the job. In the spring, when the crew sees

worms, they spray the apples with mixture of Castile Soap, canola oil and water, continuing every two weeks until harvest.

The you-pick apple season at Orchard Creek Ranch begins around the last weekend of September and runs through October, weather permitting. In addition to picking apples, which are sold by the pound, the culinary treats for sale include organic fresh-pressed apple cider, apple cider vinegar, dried apple chips, apple-wood chips for barbecuing and apple firewood. The ranch also sells grass and alfalfa hay.

Locals would be well advised to get a jump on their apple picking; an enthusiastic group called Vail Moms discovered the orchard last year and intends to come back again this year, making it a yearly outing. Those wanting to take a road trip to pick heirloom apples are invited to pack a picnic lunch and bring the whole family. Wear flat, sturdy shoes and a sunhat and bring drinking water.

Orchard Creek Ranch is located between Glenwood Springs and New Castle, just off I-70 at exit 109; watch for the signs. It’s open Fridays through Sundays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.



Pressing cider by hand.



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